

Literature and Documentary Film as Criteria of Reality: Observation, Memory, and the Social Archive

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Introduction

The question of reality has never been merely philosophical. It has always been social, institutional, and historical. What a society recognizes as real determines not only how it understands itself, but also how it distributes responsibility, allocates suffering, and justifies power. In modern societies, reality is rarely encountered in its immediate form. It is mediated, narrated, framed, archived, and circulated through texts and images that claim to represent the world as it is. Among these mediating forms, literature and documentary film occupy a peculiar and often underestimated position. They are commonly classified as cultural artifacts or aesthetic practices, yet their persistent engagement with observation, memory, and testimony situates them closer to social documentation than to fiction or art in the narrow sense.

This study proceeds from the premise that literature and documentary film function as criteria of reality not because they offer objective or comprehensive accounts of the social world, but because they preserve traces of lived experience that escape institutional abstraction. Statistical reports, legal documents, and administrative records tend to reduce human life to categories that are operationally useful but existentially impoverished. Literature and documentary film, by contrast, record the residual dimensions of social existence: hesitation, degradation, endurance, silence, and the slow accumulation of loss. These dimensions are not marginal to reality; they are among its most stable features, particularly in contexts of inequality, displacement, and structural violence.

The sociological relevance of literature has long been acknowledged, albeit often in a secondary or instrumental manner. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realist and naturalist writers were frequently treated as intuitive sociologists, whose works

illustrated social conditions later formalized by empirical research. Charles Dickens's descriptions of urban poverty in industrial England, Émile Zola's systematic portrayal of labor and heredity, Thomas Hardy's chronicling of rural dispossession, and Theodore Dreiser's depictions of economic determinism have all been cited as narrative complements to sociological analysis. Yet such readings tend to subordinate literature to sociology, treating it as a preliminary or illustrative form rather than as an autonomous mode of social knowledge. This study rejects that hierarchy. Literature is not a pre-scientific approximation of social reality; it is a parallel archive governed by different, but no less rigorous, epistemic constraints.

A similar marginalization has affected documentary film. Despite its explicit claim to non-fictionality, documentary cinema is frequently discussed in terms of aesthetics, ethics, or authorial intention, while its sociological status remains under-theorized. The emergence of documentary photography and film in the early twentieth century, particularly in the context of social reform movements, marked a turning point in the visual registration of reality. The photographic work of Dorothea Lange for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression, the observational films of Lionel Rogosin depicting urban marginality, and later the war photography of Don McCullin all demonstrate that documentary images do not merely reflect reality but actively construct a social archive of suffering and endurance. These images persist in collective memory precisely because they resist narrative closure and moral consolation.

Central to this analysis is the concept of observation. Observation, in the sociological sense, is not synonymous with neutrality or detachment. It is a disciplined form of attention shaped by proximity, duration, and ethical exposure. Both literature and documentary film depend on prolonged engagement with their subjects. They require the observer to remain present in situations that are uncomfortable, repetitive, or socially invisible. Unlike journalistic reporting, which privileges immediacy and eventfulness, these forms attend to structural conditions that unfold slowly and resist dramatic resolution. Observation, in this context, becomes a methodological

commitment to staying with reality rather than extracting from it a consumable narrative.

Memory constitutes the second analytical axis of this study. Social memory is not a passive repository of past events but an active process of selection, suppression, and reinterpretation. Maurice Halbwachs demonstrated that memory is socially framed, shaped by group affiliations and institutional contexts. Subsequent work in memory studies has further emphasized the role of cultural media in stabilizing or contesting dominant narratives of the past. Literature and documentary film participate in this process by preserving experiences that are often excluded from official histories. They register what Aleida Assmann has described as “storage memory”: elements of the past that remain available for retrieval even when they are not integrated into a society’s functional memory. In doing so, they challenge the moral economy of remembrance by insisting on the persistence of unresolved suffering.

The notion of the social archive provides the conceptual bridge between observation and memory. An archive is commonly understood as a formal institution that preserves documents deemed worthy of retention. Yet archives also exist outside institutional boundaries. They are formed wherever traces of social life are recorded, transmitted, and made legible to others. Literature and documentary film constitute such an extra-institutional archive. Their materials are subjective, fragmentary, and often resistant to verification in conventional empirical terms, yet they offer access to dimensions of reality that institutional archives systematically exclude. This study treats the social archive not as a neutral collection of records but as a contested field in which different forms of knowledge compete for legitimacy.

A comparative approach underlies the entire analysis. Rather than opposing literature and documentary film as distinct or incompatible media, the study examines their shared epistemological foundations and divergent modes of representation. Both rely on selection, framing, and temporal organization, yet they differ in their relationship to language, image, and bodily presence. Literature operates through linguistic mediation, requiring the reader to reconstruct reality through imagination and

interpretation. Documentary film confronts the viewer with visual and auditory traces that appear more immediate but are no less constructed. The comparison between these forms illuminates how different regimes of representation shape our understanding of what counts as real.

The historical scope of the study spans from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, a period marked by industrialization, mass migration, total war, and the expansion of bureaucratic governance. These processes generated unprecedented forms of social dislocation and institutional control, making questions of reality and representation particularly acute. Writers such as Erich Maria Remarque, whose novels repeatedly return to themes of exile, bureaucratic indifference, and existential exhaustion, exemplify how literature can articulate the systemic dimensions of despair without reducing it to individual pathology. Similarly, documentary practices emerging from periods of crisis reveal how visual testimony can expose structural violence without resorting to sensationalism.

This work does not claim that literature and documentary film provide a more truthful account of reality than other forms of social knowledge. Rather, it argues that they establish criteria by which reality can be recognized, contested, and remembered. These criteria are grounded in sustained observation, attentiveness to marginal lives, and resistance to narrative closure. In an era characterized by the proliferation of images, accelerated consumption of information, and the aestheticization of suffering through digital platforms, such criteria acquire renewed urgency. The distinction between representation and simulation, between testimony and spectacle, becomes increasingly fragile.

By re-situating literature and documentary film within the sociological analysis of reality, this study seeks to restore their status as serious modes of social inquiry. They do not replace empirical research, but they interrogate its blind spots. They remind us that reality is not exhausted by what can be counted, categorized, or efficiently managed. It also consists of what endures without resolution, what resists institutional recognition, and what survives in memory despite systematic efforts to erase it. In this

sense, literature and documentary film do not merely depict reality; they preserve the conditions under which reality remains thinkable.

Chapter I. Literature as a Mode of Social Knowledge

The persistent inclination to classify literature as a secondary or illustrative source of social knowledge reveals a deeper epistemological hierarchy embedded in modern academic thought. This hierarchy privileges forms of knowledge that present themselves as methodologically transparent, formally verifiable, and institutionally sanctioned. Literature, by contrast, operates through narrative, metaphor, and subjective positioning, features that have often been interpreted as epistemic weaknesses rather than as alternative modes of cognition. Such an interpretation rests on a narrow conception of what it means to know society. If social reality is understood not merely as an aggregate of measurable variables but as a field of lived constraints, expectations, and degradations, then literature emerges not as an auxiliary source but as a primary site of sociological insight.

Literary observation differs fundamentally from institutional observation. Where bureaucratic and scientific systems seek to stabilize reality through classification and abstraction, literature attends to instability, contradiction, and excess. It registers what cannot be easily formalized: the erosion of dignity, the normalization of deprivation, the quiet persistence of structural injustice. These phenomena do not appear episodically; they accumulate. Literature is uniquely equipped to follow this accumulation over time, tracing how social conditions imprint themselves on individual trajectories without reducing those trajectories to psychological idiosyncrasies. In this sense, literature does not merely describe social reality; it reconstructs the conditions under which social reality becomes inhabitable or unbearable.

The rise of realist literature in the nineteenth century corresponds to a historical moment in which traditional forms of social integration were destabilized by industrial

capitalism, urban expansion, and the rationalization of governance. These processes produced new categories of visibility and invisibility. Poverty, for instance, ceased to be an episodic phenomenon associated with local misfortune and became a structural feature of urban life. Literary realism did not invent this reality; it made it legible. The crowded streets, polluted air, precarious labor, and institutional indifference depicted in realist novels function as empirical observations rendered through narrative continuity rather than statistical aggregation. The city, in this context, becomes not merely a setting but a social mechanism that organizes exposure, vulnerability, and exclusion.

Charles Dickens's work exemplifies this mode of literary observation. His novels do not approach poverty as an anomaly to be corrected through moral reform or charitable intervention. Instead, they depict poverty as a stable outcome of institutional arrangements that regulate labor, welfare, and punishment. Workhouses, courts, factories, and schools recur not as isolated sites but as interconnected components of a social system that disciplines the poor while claiming to assist them. Dickens's narrative method is repetitive by design. The return to similar scenes of deprivation across different novels is not a failure of imagination but a sociological statement: the conditions persist because the structures persist. Literature, here, performs a function analogous to longitudinal observation in social research, documenting continuity rather than exception.

Naturalist literature intensifies this observational commitment by foregrounding the material determinants of social life. Émile Zola's novels insist on the physicality of labor, the exhaustion of bodies, and the spatial constraints imposed by industrial environments. Mines, factories, and overcrowded dwellings are not symbolic backdrops; they are active forces shaping behavior, health, and social relations. Zola's attention to detail—tools, injuries, smells, and rhythms of work—constitutes a form of empirical density rarely matched by institutional documentation of the same period. Official reports on labor conditions often abstract suffering into categories of productivity and efficiency. Literary observation restores the experiential dimension

that such abstraction suppresses.

This restoration is not sentimental. Naturalist literature frequently withholds moral judgment, presenting social mechanisms with an almost clinical insistence on causality. Heredity, environment, and economic pressure operate not as metaphysical explanations but as observable constraints. The resulting narratives resist closure because the conditions they document are ongoing. Strikes may fail, reforms may stall, and individual resistance may collapse under systemic pressure. Literature thus records not the resolution of social conflict but its endurance.

Rural societies undergoing modernization present a different but equally instructive field of observation. Thomas Hardy's novels examine the disintegration of traditional social bonds under the combined influence of legal rationalization and economic restructuring. In his work, tragedy emerges not from sudden catastrophe but from slow misalignment between lived experience and institutional norms. Laws governing inheritance, marriage, and property impose abstract criteria that disregard local knowledge and embodied relationships. Hardy's observational strength lies in his attention to temporal lag—the delay between structural change and its recognition by those subjected to it. This lag produces forms of suffering that are neither accidental nor immediately visible, yet profoundly real.

The American realist tradition further extends literature's capacity to document systemic inequality. Theodore Dreiser's narratives unfold within a social order dominated by market logic and social stratification. Ambition, success, and failure appear not as moral qualities but as effects of opportunity structures unevenly distributed across class lines. Dreiser's characters do not misunderstand the system; they understand it too well and are nonetheless constrained by it. This insight anticipates later sociological analyses of structural inequality, yet it is articulated through narrative accumulation rather than theoretical abstraction. Literature here functions as an archive of social trajectories shaped by forces that exceed individual agency.

The twentieth century introduces new forms of social dislocation that further

complicate the relationship between individual experience and institutional order. Total war, forced migration, and the expansion of bureaucratic regulation produce conditions in which belonging becomes provisional and legality precarious. Erich Maria Remarque's work documents these conditions with particular acuity. His novels are less concerned with dramatic events than with their aftermath: the long-term erosion of stability, identity, and trust in institutional protection. Exile, in Remarque's writing, is not a temporary state but a permanent sociological condition characterized by uncertainty and administrative dependency.

A distinctive feature of Remarque's literary observation is his treatment of despair and self-destruction. Suicide appears not as an inexplicable rupture but as a structural endpoint reached when institutional frameworks exhaust their capacity to sustain life. Characters do not succumb to despair in isolation; they are worn down by legal precarity, economic exclusion, and moral fatigue. Literature, in this context, documents the limits of social integration. It records what happens when institutional rationality continues to function while human viability collapses. Such documentation challenges interpretations that pathologize individual outcomes without interrogating systemic responsibility.

Across these diverse literary traditions, a common epistemological pattern emerges. Literature observes society from within, maintaining proximity to its subjects over extended periods. This proximity generates a form of knowledge that is irreducible to either empathy or critique. It reveals how social structures operate not only through explicit coercion but through normalization, delay, and attrition. Literature records the slow violence of systems that rarely appear violent in institutional self-description. As a mode of social knowledge, literature constructs an archive of lived reality that complements and contests official records. It preserves experiences that institutions overlook because they do not fit administrative categories or policy objectives. This archive is fragmentary, subjective, and resistant to standardization, yet it is precisely these qualities that render it sociologically indispensable. By attending to what persists without resolution, literature establishes criteria for recognizing reality that

remain operative even when institutional narratives shift or collapse.

The epistemological status of literary observation becomes clearer when examined in relation to the concept of social structure. In sociological theory, structures are often defined as stable patterns of relations that constrain and enable action. Yet the experiential dimension of these constraints is frequently lost in analytical abstraction. Literature restores this dimension by tracing how structures are encountered in daily life—not as explicit rules or formal hierarchies, but as persistent pressures shaping perception, expectation, and endurance. This form of knowledge does not operate through generalization but through saturation. Meaning emerges not from isolated instances but from the cumulative weight of recurring situations.

One of the distinctive capacities of literature lies in its treatment of time. Institutional knowledge tends to privilege synchronic analysis: snapshots of social conditions captured through surveys, reports, or administrative data. Literature, by contrast, is inherently diachronic. It follows characters across months, years, or entire lifetimes, revealing how social constraints unfold gradually and often imperceptibly. This temporal extension allows literature to document processes rather than states: the slow normalization of deprivation, the erosion of hope, and the internalization of structural limits. Such processes are difficult to register within frameworks oriented toward immediate outcomes or policy interventions.

This temporal dimension is particularly significant in the analysis of social suffering. Suffering, as represented in literature, rarely appears as an acute event. It is cumulative, repetitive, and frequently devoid of dramatic markers. Characters endure conditions that are neither exceptional nor easily narrativized, precisely because they are routine. Literature's insistence on this routine quality constitutes a sociological intervention. It challenges the tendency to recognize suffering only when it reaches spectacular proportions, reminding the reader that systemic harm operates most effectively when it becomes ordinary.

The relationship between literature and social norms further illuminates its documentary function. Norms operate through implicit expectations rather than

explicit enforcement. They shape behavior by defining what is acceptable, desirable, or shameful. Literature is uniquely positioned to expose these normative frameworks because it renders visible the moments at which individuals fail to meet them. Shame, humiliation, and self-doubt recur as experiential indicators of structural misalignment. These affective states are not merely psychological; they signal the internalization of social judgment. By attending to such moments, literature documents the moral economy of society—an economy that governs recognition and exclusion long before formal sanctions are applied.

The question of voice is central to understanding literature as social knowledge. Institutional documentation typically speaks in an impersonal register, suppressing the perspective of those it describes. Literature, by contrast, foregrounds voice without conflating it with authority. The narrative voice in realist and modernist traditions often occupies an ambiguous position: neither fully aligned with institutional power nor entirely external to it. This ambiguity enables a form of critical observation that does not depend on overt opposition. Instead, it reveals contradictions by juxtaposing official discourse with lived experience. The resulting tension exposes gaps between declared values and actual practices.

This exposure is particularly evident in literary representations of law and bureaucracy. Legal systems present themselves as neutral arbiters governed by rational procedures. Literature documents how these procedures are experienced by those subjected to them. Delays, misunderstandings, and administrative indifference emerge as sources of profound vulnerability. The harm inflicted by bureaucracy is rarely intentional, yet its effects are no less real. Literature captures this form of harm precisely because it attends to duration and uncertainty. Waiting, in literary narratives, becomes a social condition—a suspended state in which life is neither fully possible nor formally prohibited.

Exile and displacement provide a paradigmatic case of literature's capacity to document institutionalized precarity. Twentieth-century literature produced by displaced authors records the transformation of identity under conditions of legal

instability. Citizenship, employment, and social recognition become contingent upon documents that are perpetually provisional. Literature traces how this contingency infiltrates everyday life, shaping relationships, self-perception, and moral judgment. The displaced subject is compelled to navigate a social world in which belonging is always conditional and revocable. This condition cannot be adequately captured through legal definitions alone; it requires an account of lived uncertainty that literature is uniquely equipped to provide.

The sociological significance of suicide within literary observation must be understood against this background of structural constraint and normative pressure. Classical sociological theory, most notably Émile Durkheim's analysis of suicide, emphasized the role of social integration and regulation. Literature complements this analysis by rendering visible the experiential pathways through which disintegration and overregulation are felt. Suicide, in literary narratives, often appears not as a sudden rupture but as the culmination of prolonged attrition. Characters are worn down by conditions that individually appear manageable but collectively become unbearable. Literature documents this accumulation without reducing it to diagnostic categories.

Importantly, literary representations of suicide frequently resist moralization. They do not present self-destruction as either heroic protest or moral failure. Instead, they situate it within a continuum of social responses to constraint and exclusion. This refusal to moralize is itself sociologically significant. It challenges interpretive frameworks that seek closure through judgment, insisting instead on sustained attention to the conditions that produce such outcomes. Literature thus functions as a counter-archive to narratives that individualize responsibility while obscuring systemic causation.

The question of realism versus representation further complicates the status of literature as social knowledge. Realism is often misconstrued as a claim to transparency or objectivity. In practice, realist literature is acutely aware of the limits of representation. Its commitment is not to exhaustive depiction but to structural

plausibility. Details are selected not for their completeness but for their capacity to reveal underlying relations. This selectivity parallels methodological choices in social research, where data collection is guided by theoretical relevance rather than total coverage. Literature's realism lies in its fidelity to social logic rather than to empirical totality.

Modernist and post-realist literary forms extend this logic by foregrounding fragmentation and discontinuity. Far from undermining literature's documentary value, these formal innovations reflect changes in social experience itself. Fragmented narratives, unreliable perspectives, and unresolved endings correspond to social conditions characterized by instability and uncertainty. Literature adapts its forms to remain attuned to reality as it changes. In doing so, it preserves its function as a mode of social observation even as traditional narrative structures become inadequate.

The cumulative effect of these literary practices is the construction of a social archive that operates alongside, and sometimes against, institutional archives. This archive does not aspire to comprehensiveness or neutrality. Its value lies in its capacity to preserve traces of experience that resist formalization. These traces become resources for understanding social reality precisely because they retain their ambiguity and incompleteness. Literature does not resolve social contradictions; it sustains them within memory.

As a mode of social knowledge, literature thus establishes criteria for reality grounded in duration, exposure, and experiential density. Reality, in this framework, is not defined by statistical frequency or institutional recognition alone. It is defined by what persists, what recurs, and what remains unresolved across time. Literature documents these dimensions with a rigor that complements, rather than competes with, sociological theory.

This understanding prepares the ground for a comparative analysis with documentary film. While literature operates through linguistic mediation and temporal extension, documentary film introduces visual immediacy and embodied presence. The transition from textual to visual observation does not mark a shift from interpretation to

transparency. Instead, it reveals a different configuration of the same epistemological problem: how reality is observed, preserved, and transmitted under conditions of structural constraint.

A further dimension of literature's sociological significance lies in its capacity to register failure without translating it into deviation. Institutional knowledge systems tend to treat failure as an anomaly to be corrected, classified, or explained away. Individuals who do not conform to expected trajectories of productivity, stability, or adaptation are marked as exceptions within an otherwise functional order. Literature, by contrast, documents failure as a patterned outcome of ordinary social arrangements. Unemployment, indebtedness, marginalization, and social exhaustion appear not as interruptions of normality but as its predictable consequences. This shift in perspective destabilizes the moral framework through which societies interpret success and responsibility.

The literary representation of failure often unfolds through the gradual narrowing of available choices. Characters do not encounter a single decisive moment but a sequence of minor constraints that cumulatively foreclose alternatives. Literature attends to these micro-processes with a patience rarely matched by institutional analysis. Missed opportunities, deferred decisions, and compromised aspirations accumulate into structural traps. By narrating these processes over time, literature exposes the fallacy of retrospective judgment, which tends to locate failure in isolated decisions rather than in the architecture of constraint that shaped them.

This attention to constraint extends to the body as a site of social inscription. While institutional records frequently abstract the body into units of labor, health, or deviance, literature preserves its vulnerability and exhaustion. Illness, hunger, fatigue, and aging recur not as metaphors but as material conditions shaping social participation. The body becomes an archive of social relations, bearing the marks of exploitation, neglect, and endurance. Literary observation captures how bodily limits intersect with economic and legal structures, producing forms of exclusion that cannot be fully articulated in administrative language.

The depiction of work in literature illustrates this intersection with particular clarity. Labor appears not merely as economic activity but as a temporal regime that organizes daily life and future expectations. Repetitive, precarious, or degrading work shapes perception and self-worth long before it produces measurable outcomes. Literature documents how work disciplines attention, erodes autonomy, and reconfigures social relationships. These effects are often invisible in institutional evaluations of employment, which prioritize productivity and compliance over experiential cost. By foregrounding the lived dimension of labor, literature challenges reductive accounts of economic participation.

Another crucial aspect of literature as social knowledge is its treatment of silence. Silence in literary narratives is not simply the absence of speech; it is a social phenomenon produced by power relations, shame, and fear. Characters remain silent not because they lack experiences but because available languages fail to accommodate them. Literature registers these silences by attending to what is not said, what is deferred, and what is expressed indirectly. Such silences constitute negative evidence of social reality, pointing to zones of exclusion within dominant discourses. Institutional knowledge systems rarely account for silence, yet it is often the most reliable indicator of marginalization.

Memory operates within literature not as a repository of resolved meaning but as a contested terrain. Characters remember selectively, inconsistently, and often against their own interests. These distortions are not narrative flaws; they reflect the social conditions under which memory is formed and maintained. Traumatic experiences, prolonged insecurity, and social dislocation disrupt linear recollection. Literature preserves these disruptions rather than correcting them, offering insight into how memory functions under pressure. This preservation is sociologically significant because it resists the stabilization of past events into coherent narratives that serve present interests.

The relationship between individual memory and collective frameworks further reinforces literature's archival function. Literary narratives frequently juxtapose

personal recollection with official histories, revealing discrepancies between lived experience and public commemoration. Wars, economic crises, and political transitions appear differently when viewed from institutional perspectives than when recalled by those who endured their consequences. Literature documents these discrepancies without resolving them, maintaining a tension that prevents the closure of historical interpretation. In doing so, it safeguards forms of memory that would otherwise be overwritten by dominant narratives.

Literature's engagement with morality also warrants attention. Moral categories in literary texts are rarely stable or universally applicable. Characters navigate ethical dilemmas under conditions of constraint that render conventional judgments inadequate. Right and wrong are refracted through necessity, survival, and compromise. This moral ambiguity does not signal relativism; it reflects the erosion of ethical clarity under structural pressure. Literature documents how moral frameworks fracture when institutions fail to uphold their professed values. Such documentation provides critical insight into the relationship between social order and moral expectation.

The cumulative knowledge produced by literature is therefore neither normative nor prescriptive. It does not offer solutions or policy recommendations. Its contribution lies in sustaining attention to realities that resist instrumentalization. By refusing to resolve social contradictions into lessons or morals, literature preserves their complexity. This refusal is itself a form of epistemic discipline. It acknowledges that certain aspects of social reality cannot be managed without first being fully confronted.

As a social archive, literature is characterized by its resistance to closure. Endings remain open, conflicts unresolved, and trajectories incomplete. This structural openness mirrors the conditions it documents. Social reality, as encountered by those at its margins, rarely conforms to narrative expectations of progress or redemption. Literature remains faithful to this reality by maintaining its indeterminacy. In doing so, it establishes a criterion of realism grounded not in representation of outcomes but

in fidelity to process.

The authority of literature as social knowledge ultimately derives from its capacity to remain with what is uncomfortable, repetitive, and unresolved. It does not extract meaning from reality in order to render it consumable. Instead, it preserves the density of experience that institutions seek to streamline. This preservation does not guarantee moral clarity or analytical certainty. It guarantees something more modest and more demanding: the continued visibility of social conditions that would otherwise fade into abstraction or silence.

Through this sustained visibility, literature affirms its role as a mode of social knowledge that operates alongside, and at times against, institutional forms of understanding. It does not claim supremacy over empirical research or historical documentation. Rather, it insists on criteria of reality grounded in duration, exposure, and experiential continuity. These criteria remain operative even when formal systems of knowledge shift, reformulate, or disavow their own consequences.

Chapter II. Documentary Film and the Visual Registration of Social Reality

The emergence of documentary film as a mode of social observation marks a critical transformation in the ways reality is recorded, preserved, and made intelligible.

Unlike literature, which operates through linguistic mediation and narrative duration, documentary film confronts the observer with visual and auditory traces that appear to carry an immediate relationship to the world they depict. This apparent immediacy has often been interpreted as a guarantee of authenticity. Yet the sociological significance of documentary film does not reside in its proximity to events alone. It lies in its capacity to register social reality through sustained visual attention, embodied presence, and the disciplined refusal of narrative closure.

Documentary film arises historically in response to the same structural transformations that shaped realist literature: industrialization, mass poverty, migration, war, and the expansion of bureaucratic governance. Its early development

is inseparable from social reform movements and from attempts to render visible populations that had been rendered administratively legible but socially invisible. The camera becomes an observational instrument that does not merely record events but situates the viewer within spaces of marginality, labor, and suffering. This situating function distinguishes documentary film from both fictional cinema and journalistic reporting.

The visual register introduces a different epistemological tension than that encountered in literature. Images appear to testify directly, yet they are always framed, selected, and temporally bounded. Documentary film does not escape mediation; it reconfigures it. The sociological task, therefore, is not to assess documentary images in terms of truth versus manipulation, but to examine how visual observation constructs a social archive of reality that operates under distinct constraints and possibilities. What documentary film preserves is not an unfiltered reality but a residue of social conditions captured through presence and duration.

The work of early documentary photographers and filmmakers demonstrates this logic with particular clarity. The photographic archive produced by Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression exemplifies how visual documentation can register structural suffering without aestheticizing it. Lange's images of displaced farmers, migrant laborers, and impoverished families do not isolate hardship as an individual misfortune. Instead, they situate it within a broader landscape of economic collapse and institutional failure. The subjects are neither anonymized nor dramatized. Their posture, gaze, and environment convey endurance rather than spectacle. These photographs function as social documents precisely because they resist narrative resolution. They do not explain poverty; they insist on its continued presence.

This insistence on presence is central to documentary film as a sociological medium. Unlike still photography, film introduces temporality not through narrative progression but through duration. The camera lingers. It observes repetitive actions, extended waiting, and uneventful routines. Such duration is rarely tolerated in commercial cinema, which relies on movement and resolution. Documentary film, by

contrast, often derives its meaning from what appears static or monotonous. This monotony is sociologically significant. It reflects the lived reality of structural constraint, in which change is slow, uncertain, or absent.

Lionel Rogosin's documentary films offer a paradigmatic example of this observational commitment. His work focuses on marginalized urban populations, presenting their lives without explanatory voiceover or imposed moral framing. The camera remains close, attentive, and patient. Conversations unfold without narrative orchestration. The absence of commentary does not produce neutrality; it produces exposure. Viewers are confronted with social realities that cannot be easily assimilated into familiar interpretive frameworks. Rogosin's films do not invite empathy as an emotional response; they demand recognition of social conditions that persist without intervention.

The epistemological force of documentary film also derives from its engagement with space. Literary texts reconstruct space through description and imagination, whereas documentary film records spatial arrangements directly. Streets, factories, shelters, and battlefields appear not as symbolic settings but as material environments that constrain movement and interaction. Spatial proximity and distance become visible elements of social structure. Crowding, isolation, and segregation are registered visually, often without verbal articulation. This spatial registration complements sociological analyses of urban and institutional organization by rendering their effects immediately perceptible.

War photography and documentary film further extend the visual registration of social reality into zones of extreme violence. The work of Don McCullin exemplifies how documentary images can expose the human cost of political and military decisions without resorting to sensationalism. McCullin's photographs do not depict combat as action; they depict its aftermath: wounded bodies, displaced civilians, and devastated landscapes. These images resist heroic framing. They record vulnerability rather than victory, endurance rather than triumph. As social documents, they preserve evidence of structural violence that official military narratives seek to normalize or obscure.

The ethical dimension of documentary film cannot be separated from its sociological significance. The presence of the camera alters social situations, raising questions about consent, exploitation, and representation. Yet these ethical tensions do not invalidate documentary observation; they constitute part of its reality. Documentary film does not occupy a neutral position outside social relations. It is embedded within them. Its ethical ambiguity mirrors the ambiguity of social intervention more broadly. By acknowledging this embeddedness, documentary film avoids the pretense of objectivity that often accompanies institutional documentation.

The relationship between documentary film and memory further underscores its archival function. Visual records acquire meaning over time as they are recontextualized within collective memory. Images that initially function as contemporary documentation later become historical evidence. Documentary film thus operates across temporal registers, preserving traces of social reality that outlast the contexts of their production. These traces are not self-explanatory; they require interpretation. Yet their persistence ensures that certain realities remain accessible even when institutional narratives evolve or disappear.

Documentary film's resistance to narrative closure aligns it with literature's documentary function while distinguishing it through visual immediacy. Many documentary works conclude without resolution, leaving social conditions unchanged and questions unanswered. This openness is not a failure of form but a reflection of reality itself. Structural inequality, displacement, and violence do not conform to narrative arcs. Documentary film preserves this non-resolution, refusing to offer consolation where none exists.

As a mode of social knowledge, documentary film establishes criteria of reality grounded in presence, duration, and visual evidence. These criteria differ from those of literature, yet they converge in their insistence on sustained attention to marginal and degraded forms of life. Documentary film does not explain social reality; it exposes it. It constructs a visual archive that complements textual records while challenging their abstractions. In doing so, it expands the sociological imagination,

not by providing answers, but by preserving the visibility of conditions that resist resolution.

A decisive distinction between documentary film and other visual media lies in its relationship to spectacle. Spectacle organizes attention through excess, acceleration, and emotional escalation. It demands immediacy and rewards instant recognition. Documentary film, when functioning as a mode of social knowledge, operates in deliberate opposition to this logic. Its observational power depends on restraint rather than intensity, on duration rather than climax. The refusal of spectacle is not an aesthetic preference but a sociological necessity. Social reality, particularly in its most consequential forms, rarely announces itself through dramatic events. It unfolds through repetition, delay, and normalization. Documentary film becomes sociologically relevant precisely when it aligns its formal structure with these rhythms.

This alignment is most evident in observational documentary traditions that minimize authorial intervention. The absence of explanatory narration, musical cues, or rapid montage does not produce neutrality; it produces exposure. Viewers are compelled to confront situations without interpretive guidance, encountering social reality as an unresolved field rather than a concluded argument. Such exposure generates discomfort rather than clarity. From a sociological perspective, this discomfort is productive. It mirrors the uncertainty experienced by those whose lives are structured by conditions they do not control. Documentary film thus reproduces not only the appearance of social reality but also its affective texture.

The camera's capacity to register embodiment introduces another critical dimension of social knowledge. Bodies in documentary film are not symbolic carriers of meaning; they are sites of constraint and endurance. Gesture, posture, fatigue, and hesitation become visible markers of social position. Unlike institutional representations that abstract individuals into cases or categories, documentary film preserves bodily singularity without transforming it into individuality in the liberal sense. The body appears as socially situated rather than autonomous. This situatedness

reveals how power operates not only through explicit coercion but through the regulation of movement, visibility, and vulnerability.

Waiting occupies a central place in documentary representations of marginality.

Waiting for work, for documents, for assistance, or for the cessation of violence constitutes a dominant temporal experience for many populations. Documentary film is uniquely equipped to register this temporality. Long takes and minimal editing render waiting perceptible rather than incidental. Time ceases to function as a narrative device and becomes an object of observation. This transformation has significant sociological implications. It exposes how institutional processes distribute time unequally, granting acceleration to some while imposing suspension on others. Waiting emerges as a form of social control that rarely appears in policy discourse yet profoundly shapes lived reality.

Sound, often subordinated to image in analyses of documentary film, further contributes to its documentary capacity. Ambient noise, fragmented speech, and prolonged silence provide access to social environments that resist linguistic articulation. The absence of coherent dialogue is itself informative. It reflects conditions of exhaustion, marginalization, or communicative breakdown.

Documentary soundscapes preserve these conditions without translating them into explanatory language. In doing so, they maintain fidelity to social reality as it is encountered rather than as it is interpreted.

The question of authenticity in documentary film has frequently been framed in moral or philosophical terms. From a sociological perspective, authenticity is less a property of images than a function of relational positioning. Documentary film does not become authentic by eliminating mediation; it becomes sociologically meaningful by situating mediation within social relations. The camera's presence, the filmmaker's choices, and the subjects' awareness of being observed all form part of the documented reality. Attempts to erase these elements in the name of objectivity reproduce the illusion of neutrality characteristic of institutional knowledge systems. Documentary film's strength lies in its capacity to make mediation visible without

allowing it to dominate representation.

The persistence of documentary images within collective memory further reinforces their archival role. Images acquire sociological significance not only at the moment of recording but through their circulation, repetition, and recontextualization.

Photographs and films produced as contemporary documentation later function as historical evidence, shaping how societies remember crises, conflicts, and transformations. This temporal displacement does not stabilize meaning; it multiplies it. Documentary images are continually reinterpreted in light of new knowledge and shifting moral frameworks. Their endurance within memory ensures that certain social realities remain available for reassessment rather than being sealed within definitive narratives.

Documentary film's relationship to institutions is inherently ambivalent. On one hand, documentary practices have often relied on institutional support, funding, and distribution. On the other, they frequently document the failures, exclusions, and violences produced by those same institutions. This ambivalence is not a contradiction to be resolved but a condition to be examined. Documentary film operates within the structures it observes, negotiating access, legitimacy, and survival. Its critical capacity emerges not from external opposition but from internal friction. By documenting institutional consequences without adopting institutional language, documentary film exposes discrepancies between official self-representation and lived experience.

The visual registration of inequality in documentary film underscores this discrepancy with particular force. Inequality appears not as an abstract differential but as a spatial and bodily arrangement. Crowded living conditions, deteriorating infrastructure, and restricted mobility become visible indices of social stratification. These indices do not require explanation; they demand recognition. Documentary film's refusal to translate visual evidence into conceptual closure preserves the gap between seeing and understanding. This gap is sociologically significant because it resists the premature conversion of observation into interpretation.

Documentary film also complicates the relationship between empathy and knowledge.

While visual proximity can elicit emotional responses, documentary observation does not guarantee empathy, nor does it seek to manufacture it. Emotional reactions vary across viewers and contexts. What remains constant is the preservation of evidence. Documentary film does not instruct viewers how to feel; it confronts them with realities that must be accounted for, whether emotionally or analytically. This confrontation distinguishes documentary film from advocacy media, which prioritize persuasion over observation.

As a form of social documentation, documentary film thus extends the archive of reality through visual endurance rather than narrative explanation. It records what persists, what waits, and what remains unresolved. Its sociological value lies not in offering solutions but in sustaining visibility. In societies increasingly saturated with images yet deprived of sustained attention, this capacity acquires heightened importance. Documentary film insists that reality cannot be reduced to moments of intensity or consumption. It must be observed over time, in silence, and without the promise of resolution.

A crucial distinction must be drawn between documentary evidence and what may be termed visual administration. While both rely on images, they operate according to fundamentally different logics. Documentary evidence seeks to preserve traces of social reality that resist standardization. Visual administration, by contrast, employs images as tools of governance, control, and normalization. Administrative images are produced to classify, verify, and regulate populations. They do not observe reality in its density; they reduce it to legible units compatible with institutional objectives. This distinction is essential for understanding the sociological stakes of documentary film. Visual administration is characterized by its instrumental orientation. Identification photographs, surveillance footage, biometric scans, and procedural recordings are not concerned with endurance, uncertainty, or lived experience. Their function is to confirm identity, document compliance, or detect deviation. Time, in administrative imagery, is compressed into moments of verification. The image serves as proof of presence, not as a record of existence. Documentary film, in contrast, expands time. It

records not the instant of recognition but the duration of exposure. This temporal divergence marks a fundamental epistemological difference between the two modes of visuality.

The administrative image claims neutrality through standardization. Uniform framing, regulated lighting, and prescribed poses are designed to eliminate context. Individuals are abstracted from their environments and histories. This abstraction enables comparison and classification but simultaneously erases the conditions under which social life unfolds. Documentary film reintroduces context by refusing standardization. Its images are irregular, contingent, and often incomplete. This incompleteness is not a deficiency; it reflects the complexity of social reality.

Documentary evidence does not aspire to administrative clarity; it preserves ambiguity as a sociological resource.

The contrast becomes particularly stark in contexts of migration and displacement. Administrative visual regimes demand visibility for the purpose of control. Refugees and migrants are required to present themselves to the camera in ways that confirm legal categories. Documentary film, when addressing similar populations, operates under a different mandate. It observes how individuals navigate spaces of temporary shelter, border zones, and bureaucratic waiting. The camera does not authenticate identity; it witnesses condition. This shift from verification to witnessing alters the meaning of visibility itself. Being seen no longer guarantees recognition or protection; it exposes vulnerability.

Censorship and selection play a decisive role in shaping visual archives. No documentary image enters public circulation without passing through processes of choice and exclusion. These processes are not always overt or centralized. They operate through funding priorities, distribution channels, legal restrictions, and cultural norms governing what is considered appropriate or relevant. Documentary film, despite its critical potential, is not immune to these forces. The sociological task is not to idealize documentary practice but to examine how constraints on visibility structure the archive of reality.

Censorship in documentary contexts often functions indirectly. Rather than suppressing images outright, institutions may restrict access, deny resources, or limit dissemination. Certain social realities remain under-documented not because they are invisible but because their documentation is deemed undesirable or unmarketable. Chronic poverty, institutional neglect, and everyday violence lack the eventfulness that attracts attention. Documentary film that commits to observing such conditions confronts not only aesthetic challenges but structural barriers. Its marginal position within media economies reflects the marginality of the realities it seeks to preserve. Selection operates at multiple levels within documentary practice. Filmmakers choose subjects, frames, durations, and sequences. These choices are unavoidable and constitute part of the documentary process. What distinguishes documentary evidence from visual administration is not the absence of selection but the orientation of selection toward endurance rather than legibility. Documentary selection seeks to maintain fidelity to lived conditions even when they resist narrative coherence. Administrative selection, by contrast, prioritizes efficiency and clarity, discarding elements that complicate classification. This divergence underscores the epistemological stakes of visual representation.

Invisibility emerges as a central category in the sociology of visual archives. Invisibility does not simply denote the absence of images. It refers to the systematic exclusion of certain conditions from representation. Populations may be hyper-visible in administrative contexts while remaining invisible in documentary archives. Surveillance footage may proliferate, yet lived experience remains undocumented. This paradox reveals that visibility alone is not sufficient for social recognition. The manner in which visibility is structured determines whether it functions as evidence or as control.

Documentary film confronts invisibility by attending to what lies outside dominant visual regimes. It records spaces and practices that are not designed to be seen: informal labor, domestic interiors, and transitional zones. These spaces often fall between institutional categories, rendering them difficult to document through

administrative means. Documentary observation renders them visible without converting them into objects of regulation. This preservation of non-administrative visibility constitutes a form of resistance to the totalizing tendencies of visual governance.

The politics of invisibility also intersects with questions of risk. Documenting certain realities exposes subjects to potential harm, particularly in authoritarian or highly regulated environments. Documentary filmmakers must navigate ethical dilemmas that have no procedural solutions. Decisions about what to show and what to withhold are shaped by considerations of safety as well as truth. These dilemmas underscore the embeddedness of documentary practice within social relations of power. Unlike administrative imagery, which externalizes responsibility through procedure, documentary evidence confronts responsibility directly.

The durability of documentary images within the social archive depends on their capacity to resist assimilation into dominant visual narratives. Images that conform too closely to familiar tropes risk being absorbed into spectacle or propaganda. Documentary film preserves its sociological relevance by maintaining friction—by refusing to offer images that resolve into comfort or certainty. This friction sustains the visibility of social conditions that institutions prefer to manage rather than acknowledge.

The distinction between documentary evidence and visual administration thus clarifies the criteria by which visual representations contribute to social knowledge.

Documentary evidence does not validate reality through verification; it preserves reality through exposure. It does not seek to render society governable but to render it observable. In doing so, documentary film constructs a visual archive that complements textual records while challenging the authority of administrative vision. The analysis of censorship, selection, and invisibility reveals that the social archive is not a neutral repository but a contested field shaped by power, access, and endurance. Documentary film occupies a precarious position within this field, negotiating between visibility and vulnerability, preservation and risk. Its contribution to

sociological understanding lies in its insistence that what is most consequential in social life is often what remains least administratively visible.

The contrast between documentary time and bureaucratic time reveals one of the most fundamental divergences between visual observation as social knowledge and visibility as institutional function. Time within bureaucratic systems is organized for efficiency, predictability, and control. It is segmented into deadlines, procedures, and measurable intervals. Bureaucratic time does not unfold; it is administered. Its primary purpose is not to reflect lived experience but to regulate it. Documentary film, by contrast, operates within a temporal logic that resists segmentation. It observes time as it is endured rather than as it is allocated.

Bureaucratic time reduces human existence to sequences of compliance. Waiting periods, application cycles, and review processes are defined in advance, irrespective of their effects on those subjected to them. Time becomes an instrument of governance. Delays are not incidental; they are structural mechanisms through which power is exercised without overt coercion. Documentary film renders this mechanism visible by refusing to compress or normalize it. Extended sequences of waiting, repetition, and inactivity are not narrative failures; they are sociological observations of temporal domination.

The experiential disparity between these temporal regimes becomes particularly evident in contexts of precarity. Individuals navigating welfare systems, immigration procedures, or judicial processes encounter time not as a neutral resource but as an obstacle. Their lives are suspended within institutional schedules over which they have little control. Documentary film captures this suspension through duration. The camera remains present during moments that bureaucratic logic considers empty or unproductive. These moments, however, constitute the core of lived reality for those affected. By preserving them, documentary film documents a form of temporal inequality that remains largely unacknowledged in policy discourse.

Bureaucratic time aspires to closure. Each process is designed to culminate in a decision, a verdict, or an outcome. This orientation toward resolution structures

institutional narratives of progress and accountability. Documentary time resists closure. Social conditions rarely resolve neatly; they persist, recur, or transform without definitive endpoints. Documentary film aligns its temporal structure with this persistence. It does not promise conclusions where none exist. Endings, when they occur, are provisional. This provisionality reflects the ongoing nature of the social realities being observed.

The management of time within institutions also produces specific forms of visibility and invisibility. Moments that do not contribute directly to procedural outcomes are excluded from institutional representation. Waiting rooms, informal interactions, and periods of uncertainty fall outside the scope of administrative documentation.

Documentary film reclaims these temporal margins, rendering them visible as sites of social experience. This reclamation challenges institutional assumptions about what counts as relevant or real. Time that is administratively empty emerges as experientially dense.

The relationship between documentary time and memory further complicates this temporal contrast. Bureaucratic records freeze time into discrete entries, each corresponding to a procedural step. Memory, however, does not align with such segmentation. Individuals remember prolonged states rather than isolated moments. Documentary film, by preserving duration, aligns more closely with the structure of memory than with administrative chronology. Its images do not correspond to dates or deadlines; they correspond to lived intervals. This alignment reinforces documentary film's role as an archive of social memory rather than administrative history.

Temporal discipline within bureaucratic systems also shapes behavior. Anticipation, anxiety, and resignation emerge as responses to institutional scheduling. Documentary film observes these affective consequences without translating them into functional categories. Facial expressions, bodily posture, and patterns of movement register temporal stress. The absence of action becomes meaningful. Such observations reveal how time itself becomes a medium through which power operates. Documentary film exposes this medium by making it perceptible.

The acceleration of administrative processes in contemporary societies introduces further tensions between these temporal regimes. Digitalization promises efficiency and immediacy, yet often intensifies surveillance and conditionality. Decisions may be automated, but waiting persists in new forms. Documentary film adapts to these changes by observing how accelerated systems coexist with prolonged uncertainty. The coexistence of speed and suspension produces temporal dissonance that reshapes social experience. Documentary observation captures this dissonance without resolving it.

The ethical implications of documentary time are inseparable from its sociological significance. To remain with subjects over extended periods requires commitment and exposure. Documentary film does not extract moments; it accumulates them. This accumulation entails responsibility toward those whose time is being observed. Unlike bureaucratic systems, which externalize responsibility through procedure, documentary practice confronts responsibility directly through sustained presence. This confrontation reinforces the distinction between administrative oversight and documentary witnessing.

By foregrounding duration, documentary film asserts that time is not merely a background variable but a central dimension of social reality. Bureaucratic time organizes society according to institutional priorities. Documentary time reveals how these priorities are lived, resisted, or endured. The tension between these temporal regimes is not a theoretical abstraction; it is a daily reality for populations subjected to institutional control. Documentary film renders this reality observable by aligning its form with the temporal texture of social life.

Through this temporal alignment, documentary film expands the criteria by which reality is recognized and archived. Reality is not only what happens; it is what continues to happen without resolution. Documentary time preserves this continuity, insisting that social existence cannot be fully understood through procedural milestones alone. In maintaining fidelity to duration, documentary film affirms its role as a mode of social knowledge that remains attentive to the temporal dimensions of

inequality, exclusion, and endurance.

Chapter III. Memory, Comparison, and the Social Archive

Memory does not merely preserve reality; it reorganizes it. In sociological terms, memory functions as a selective mechanism through which societies stabilize meaning, distribute responsibility, and negotiate continuity across time. What is remembered is never identical with what has occurred. It is shaped by institutional frameworks, cultural narratives, and available forms of representation. Literature and documentary film intervene in this process not by correcting memory but by complicating it. They preserve traces of social reality that resist integration into coherent or functional narratives, thereby expanding the boundaries of what can be collectively recalled.

The sociological significance of memory lies in its relational character. As Maurice Halbwachs demonstrated, memory is structured by social groups and sustained through shared frameworks of interpretation. Individual recollection is inseparable from collective contexts that determine what is recallable and what remains unarticulated. Yet these frameworks are neither neutral nor exhaustive. They privilege certain experiences while marginalizing others. Literature and documentary film operate at the edges of these frameworks, preserving experiences that exceed or disrupt dominant modes of remembrance. Their contribution to social memory is not additive but corrective, introducing dissonance into stabilized accounts of the past. Comparison constitutes a central methodological operation in this process. Social reality becomes intelligible not through isolated observation but through relational contrast. Literature and documentary film enable such contrast by juxtaposing different temporalities, social positions, and institutional settings. Comparison does not function here as a classificatory tool aimed at typology. It functions as a means of revealing structural continuities and asymmetries that remain invisible within singular narratives. By placing disparate experiences in relation to one another, these media

expose patterns of endurance and exclusion that persist across contexts.

The social archive emerges at the intersection of memory and comparison. Unlike institutional archives, which are governed by criteria of administrative relevance and legal validity, the social archive is constituted through preservation of experiential traces. It is not a centralized repository but a dispersed field of records embedded in texts, images, and narratives. Literature and documentary film contribute to this archive by retaining what institutions discard: ambiguity, contradiction, and unresolved loss. These elements are not residual; they are constitutive of social reality as it is lived.

Institutional archives aspire to closure. Files are completed, cases resolved, and records sealed. Memory, however, resists such finality. Traumatic events, structural injustices, and collective failures persist beyond administrative resolution. Literature and documentary film preserve this persistence by refusing to align their temporal logic with institutional timelines. They record aftermaths rather than outcomes, residues rather than decisions. In doing so, they maintain access to realities that would otherwise be foreclosed by procedural finality.

The act of remembering through literature and documentary film is inseparable from interpretation. These media do not present memory as a transparent retrieval of the past. They foreground its constructed nature, exposing the processes through which meaning is assigned and reassigned over time. This reflexivity distinguishes them from commemorative practices that seek to stabilize memory into fixed narratives. By maintaining openness, literature and documentary film allow memory to remain a site of inquiry rather than reverence.

Comparison across media further complicates the structure of social memory. Literary memory operates through language, metaphor, and narrative continuity. Documentary memory operates through images, sound, and duration. Each medium preserves different aspects of reality and excludes others. Their coexistence within the social archive enables cross-validation without convergence. Discrepancies between textual and visual records do not signal error; they reveal the multiplicity of social

experience. Memory becomes plural rather than unified, contested rather than resolved.

The politics of memory are inseparable from power. Decisions about what is commemorated, archived, or forgotten reflect institutional priorities and ideological interests. Literature and documentary film intervene in this politics by sustaining counter-memories that resist official narratives. These counter-memories do not necessarily propose alternative histories; they preserve experiential evidence that complicates historical interpretation. By doing so, they prevent the monopolization of memory by dominant institutions.

Silence occupies a paradoxical position within the social archive. What is absent from records often speaks as loudly as what is preserved. Literature and documentary film attend to these absences by making silence perceptible. Pauses, omissions, and fragmented recollections become indicators of social constraint. Memory is shown not as complete recall but as negotiation with what cannot be fully articulated. This negotiation reflects the limits of representation imposed by trauma, repression, or normative pressure.

The endurance of certain memories across generations further illustrates the role of the social archive. Experiences of war, displacement, and systemic inequality are transmitted not only through formal education but through cultural artifacts that preserve affective resonance. Literature and documentary film function as carriers of this resonance, enabling subsequent generations to encounter realities they did not experience directly. This transmission is not didactic; it is experiential. It sustains awareness without prescribing interpretation.

Comparison across historical periods reinforces this function. When literary and documentary records from different eras are placed in relation, patterns of recurrence become visible. Institutional rationality, bureaucratic indifference, and social exclusion reappear under changing guises. Memory, in this comparative sense, becomes a tool for recognizing continuity within transformation. Literature and documentary film facilitate this recognition by preserving structural similarities

beneath surface variation.

The social archive, as constituted through these media, resists instrumentalization. It does not serve policy agendas or administrative efficiency. Its value lies in its capacity to retain what remains unresolved. This retention does not impede social action; it grounds it in reality. By maintaining access to experiential evidence, the social archive prevents the erasure of consequences in the name of progress or reform.

In this framework, memory is neither a repository of facts nor a moral ledger. It is a dynamic field shaped by representation, comparison, and endurance. Literature and documentary film contribute to this field by preserving criteria of reality that extend beyond institutional recognition. They ensure that social reality remains accessible not only as history but as lived condition.

Through their integration into the social archive, literature and documentary film affirm that reality is not exhausted by what is officially recorded or collectively celebrated. It also consists of what persists without resolution, what recurs across contexts, and what remains visible only through sustained attention. Memory, when understood in this expanded sense, becomes not a retreat into the past but a mode of sociological engagement with the present.

The tension between counter-memory and institutional remembrance constitutes one of the central fault lines in the sociology of memory. Institutional remembrance is oriented toward stabilization. It produces coherent narratives that render the past administratively manageable and morally legible. Commemorations, official histories, and educational curricula function to align memory with present institutional identities and priorities. Counter-memory, by contrast, resists this alignment. It preserves experiences that do not integrate into sanctioned narratives, not because they are unknown, but because they are inconvenient. Literature and documentary film operate as primary vehicles of counter-memory by retaining fragments of reality that undermine institutional coherence.

Counter-memory does not oppose institutional remembrance through negation or polemic. Its force lies in persistence rather than confrontation. It does not seek to

replace official narratives with alternative totalities; it interrupts them by preserving unresolved residues. These residues often take the form of partial testimonies, ambiguous images, or narratives without moral resolution. By refusing narrative closure, counter-memory exposes the selective nature of institutional remembrance. What is excluded from official memory is revealed not as accidental omission but as structural necessity.

The sociological importance of counter-memory lies in its capacity to reveal how power operates retrospectively. Institutions do not merely regulate the present; they shape the past by determining which experiences are rendered intelligible. Literature and documentary film disrupt this retrospective governance by maintaining access to experiences that resist functional interpretation. They preserve memories that cannot be mobilized to justify existing arrangements. In doing so, they protect the epistemic integrity of social reality against retrospective normalization.

Comparison functions as the methodological bridge through which counter-memory acquires sociological intelligibility. Without comparison, memory risks remaining particularistic, confined to singular narratives that can be dismissed as exceptional. Comparison does not generalize by abstraction; it reveals patterns through relational positioning. By placing disparate experiences alongside one another, literature and documentary film expose structural continuities that transcend individual contexts. Comparison transforms memory from recollection into analysis.

As a sociological method, comparison operates across temporal, spatial, and institutional dimensions. Temporal comparison reveals recurrence beneath historical change. Experiences of displacement, bureaucratic indifference, and social exhaustion reappear across different epochs, even as their institutional forms evolve. Spatial comparison reveals how similar structures operate under different cultural conditions. Institutional comparison exposes how distinct bureaucratic systems generate analogous experiences of waiting, exclusion, and precarity. Literature and documentary film enable such comparisons by preserving experiential detail rather than abstract variables.

Crucially, comparison within the social archive does not aim at equivalence. It does not claim that different experiences are identical or interchangeable. Its purpose is to reveal relational patterns without erasing specificity. By maintaining the singularity of each narrative or image, comparison avoids the reductionism that often accompanies typological analysis. Sociological insight emerges not from sameness but from resonance. Literature and documentary film cultivate this resonance by allowing experiences to echo across contexts without collapsing into uniformity.

The ethics of preserving unresolved memory emerges from this methodological stance. Institutional remembrance often seeks resolution as a condition of closure. Conflicts are commemorated, injustices acknowledged, and losses symbolically redeemed. Such resolution serves important social functions, yet it also carries ethical risks. Premature closure can neutralize responsibility by transforming unresolved harm into historical fact. Literature and documentary film resist this neutralization by preserving memory in its unresolved state. This preservation is not an ethical failure; it is an ethical commitment.

Unresolved memory demands sustained attention without offering redemption. It confronts audiences with realities that cannot be morally reconciled within existing frameworks. This confrontation produces discomfort rather than catharsis. From an ethical perspective, such discomfort is necessary. It prevents the appropriation of suffering into narratives of progress or reconciliation. Literature and documentary film do not claim ownership over the memories they preserve; they act as custodians of incompleteness.

The ethical challenge lies in preserving unresolved memory without exploiting it. Documentary and literary practices must navigate the boundary between witnessing and appropriation. To preserve memory is not to aestheticize it. The restraint observed in both media—refusal of spectacle, avoidance of explanatory dominance, maintenance of ambiguity—constitutes an ethical stance. It acknowledges that certain experiences cannot be fully represented without distortion. Preservation, in this sense, becomes an act of humility rather than mastery.

Counter-memory also complicates intergenerational transmission. Unresolved memories do not offer clear lessons. They resist instrumentalization within moral education. Yet their transmission remains ethically significant. By encountering unresolved memory, subsequent generations are confronted not with conclusions but with questions that remain open. Literature and documentary film sustain this openness by refusing to finalize interpretation. They ensure that memory remains a site of inquiry rather than closure.

The comparative dimension reinforces this ethical stance by preventing the isolation of suffering within singular contexts. When unresolved memories are placed in relation, their structural dimensions become visible. This visibility does not diminish their specificity; it situates them within broader patterns of social organization. Ethics, in this framework, is not grounded in moral resolution but in sustained recognition. Literature and documentary film cultivate such recognition by maintaining fidelity to unresolved reality.

Within the social archive, unresolved memory functions as a form of resistance to temporal domestication. Institutions seek to situate harm firmly in the past in order to restore narrative continuity. Counter-memory refuses this temporal distancing. It preserves the presence of past harm within the present, not as accusation but as condition. This preservation challenges the assumption that time alone produces moral distance. It insists that unresolved realities remain ethically operative.

Comparison, counter-memory, and ethical restraint together define the role of literature and documentary film within the social archive. They do not compete with institutional remembrance; they expose its limits. By preserving unresolved memory, they maintain criteria of reality that cannot be fully absorbed into administrative or commemorative frameworks. Reality, in this sense, is not what has been resolved, recorded, or celebrated. It is what continues to exert pressure despite institutional attempts at closure.

Through this sustained pressure, the social archive remains open. It resists consolidation into a single narrative or moral order. Literature and documentary film

ensure that memory retains its capacity to unsettle, to question, and to demand attention. This capacity is not ancillary to social knowledge; it is one of its most rigorous forms.

A further dimension of the social archive emerges when memory is examined not as content but as capacity. Societies differ not only in what they remember, but in what they are able to remember without destabilizing their normative self-understanding. This capacity is unevenly distributed and institutionally regulated. Certain forms of memory are accommodated because they can be framed as concluded, exceptional, or redeemable. Others are structurally intolerable because they implicate ongoing arrangements of power. Literature and documentary film expand mnemonic capacity by preserving memories that institutions cannot metabolize without contradiction. This expansion operates through the maintenance of experiential density. Institutional remembrance tends to compress experience into symbols, anniversaries, or representative figures. Compression facilitates transmission but reduces complexity. Literature and documentary film resist compression by retaining excess: details that do not advance narrative coherence, moments that do not signify resolution, and perspectives that do not align with collective self-images. This excess is not accidental. It functions as a safeguard against mnemonic domestication. By maintaining density, these media ensure that memory remains resistant to functional simplification.

The concept of endurance provides a critical lens through which this resistance can be understood. Endurance refers not to resilience in the celebratory sense, but to the prolonged capacity to remain within conditions that offer no promise of resolution. Endurance is rarely commemorated because it lacks narrative payoff. It produces neither victory nor transformation. Yet endurance constitutes a fundamental dimension of social reality, particularly for populations subjected to structural constraint. Literature and documentary film preserve endurance as memory without converting it into virtue or lesson. In doing so, they document a form of social existence that institutions systematically overlook.

Comparison across cases of endurance further consolidates its sociological significance. When endurance is examined relationally — across different historical periods, political systems, or social groups — it becomes clear that its persistence is not contingent but structural. Literature and documentary film enable such relational insight by retaining the temporal texture of endurance rather than abstracting it into indicators. This retention allows comparison to operate without erasure. Patterns emerge not through generalization, but through the repetition of unresolved conditions across contexts.

Another critical analytic layer concerns the asymmetry between memory and responsibility. Institutional remembrance often functions to delimit responsibility by situating harm within closed temporal frames. Once acknowledged, commemorated, or archived, responsibility is considered discharged. Literature and documentary film disrupt this logic by preserving memory in forms that do not permit temporal distancing. Unresolved memory maintains proximity. It refuses to relocate harm safely into the past. This refusal has ethical implications that extend beyond moral judgment into the structure of social accountability.

The preservation of unresolved memory challenges the assumption that acknowledgment equals resolution. Institutional rituals of remembrance frequently substitute recognition for responsibility. Literature and documentary film expose this substitution by retaining the experiential consequences of harm beyond its formal acknowledgment. They reveal how institutional closure can coexist with continued suffering. This revelation does not accuse; it documents. Its force lies in sustained visibility rather than denunciation.

The social archive constructed through these media is therefore characterized by internal tension. It contains memories that cannot be reconciled with one another, narratives that resist synthesis, and images that undermine interpretive stability. This tension is not a flaw but a condition of sociological validity. A coherent archive would reproduce institutional logic. An incoherent archive preserves reality. Literature and documentary film contribute to this incoherence by maintaining heterogeneity within

memory rather than imposing interpretive unity.

This heterogeneity also safeguards against moral exhaustion. When memory is overly stabilized, it risks becoming inert—revered but disengaged. Unresolved memory remains active precisely because it demands renewed interpretation. Literature and documentary film sustain this activity by preventing definitive readings. Their openness requires each generation to re-encounter social reality rather than inherit conclusions. This requirement constitutes a form of ethical labor that cannot be delegated to institutions.

Finally, the durability of the social archive depends on its resistance to obsolescence. Institutional records are periodically revised, reclassified, or rendered inaccessible. Literature and documentary film persist outside these cycles. Their survival is not guaranteed, yet when they endure, they provide continuity across institutional ruptures. They preserve criteria of reality that remain intelligible even when administrative languages change. This preservation ensures that social reality does not vanish with the reformulation of its descriptors.

In this fully articulated framework, memory, comparison, and the social archive function together as mechanisms through which reality is sustained against reduction. Literature and documentary film do not compete with institutional knowledge; they delimit its reach. They preserve what cannot be finalized, normalized, or redeemed. By doing so, they ensure that social reality remains available not only as historical record, but as ongoing condition.

Chapter IV. Comparative Cases: Literature, Documentary Film, and the Verification of Reality

The theoretical claim that literature and documentary film function as criteria of reality requires empirical grounding. Without concrete comparison, such a claim risks remaining abstract, however coherent its conceptual framework may be. This chapter therefore examines specific cases in which literary and documentary representations

engage with analogous social conditions, allowing for a comparative assessment of how reality is preserved, distorted, or resisted across media. The purpose of this comparison is not to establish equivalence between literature and documentary film, but to test their respective capacities to register structural reality under different representational constraints.

Comparison here operates as a sociological method rather than as an aesthetic exercise. The selected cases are not exemplary because of stylistic similarity, but because they address comparable social configurations: poverty under industrial capitalism, displacement and exile, bureaucratic domination, and the endurance of marginal lives. By examining how these conditions are rendered in both literary and documentary forms, the chapter evaluates the robustness of the criteria of reality articulated in the preceding analysis.

A first comparative axis emerges around the representation of poverty and institutional indifference. Charles Dickens's depiction of urban poverty in mid-nineteenth-century England and Dorothea Lange's photographic documentation of the Great Depression in the United States belong to different historical moments and media regimes. Yet both engage with poverty as a structural condition rather than as an episodic crisis. Dickens's narratives situate deprivation within a dense institutional landscape of workhouses, courts, and charitable organizations. Poverty persists not because assistance is absent, but because assistance is administered in ways that reproduce dependency and humiliation. Lange's photographs, produced nearly a century later, register a similar structural persistence. Her images of migrant families and displaced farmers do not isolate economic hardship as an individual failure. They situate it within landscapes marked by institutional collapse and administrative inadequacy. The comparison reveals a shared criterion of reality: endurance without resolution. Dickens's characters and Lange's subjects inhabit conditions that do not progress toward redemption. Improvement, when it occurs, is partial and precarious. Both media resist the narrative impulse to transform suffering into moral lesson. Instead, they preserve poverty as a lived condition sustained by institutional arrangements. The

difference lies not in the reality observed, but in the modality of its registration.

Literature reconstructs endurance through narrative accumulation; photography confronts the viewer with its visual residue. In both cases, reality is verified through persistence rather than explanation.

A second comparative axis concerns labor and the body. Émile Zola's *Germinal* and early industrial documentaries and photographs present labor as a site of physical exhaustion and social exposure. Zola's miners are observed over time, their bodies shaped by repetitive work, injury, and deprivation. The mine operates as a total environment that structures perception, health, and collective action. Documentary images of industrial labor similarly foreground bodily strain, yet they do so without narrative interiority. The camera registers posture, movement, and fatigue, preserving evidence of labor's corporeal cost.

What emerges from this comparison is a criterion of reality grounded in bodily inscription. In both media, the body functions as an archive of social relations.

Injuries, wear, and exhaustion are not incidental details; they are material traces of structural conditions. Literature and documentary film differ in their representational strategies, yet converge in their refusal to aestheticize labor. Reality is verified through the visibility of bodily constraint, not through ideological framing.

Exile and displacement provide a third comparative field. Erich Maria Remarque's novels of exile and documentary films addressing refugee populations confront analogous conditions of legal precarity and social suspension. Remarque's characters navigate bureaucratic systems that render their existence provisional. Documents determine access to work, shelter, and recognition. Documentary films depicting displaced populations observe similar dynamics through prolonged attention to waiting, temporary accommodation, and administrative encounters. The absence of resolution is central in both cases. Exile appears not as a transitional phase but as a durable condition.

The comparison highlights the convergence of documentary time and literary time in contexts of displacement. Both media preserve the temporality of waiting as a

dominant experience. Decisions are deferred, futures postponed, and identities suspended. Reality is verified not through eventfulness but through stagnation. This stagnation is not a narrative device; it is a sociological condition reproduced across historical contexts. The comparison reinforces the argument that reality is often constituted by what fails to happen.

A fourth comparative axis concerns bureaucratic domination. Literary depictions of law, administration, and institutional procedure often emphasize delay, opacity, and moral indifference. Documentary film registers the same phenomena through observation of administrative spaces: offices, queues, interviews, and surveillance. In both cases, bureaucracy emerges not as a neutral mechanism but as a temporal and affective regime. Individuals experience bureaucracy not through its stated purpose, but through its effects: uncertainty, dependency, and exhaustion.

The comparative analysis reveals that reality is not verified by institutional self-description, but by lived consequence. Literature articulates these consequences through narrative interiority; documentary film preserves them through visual duration. The criteria of reality remain consistent across media: persistence, exposure, and the absence of closure. Differences in form do not undermine these criteria; they confirm their robustness.

Finally, comparison across media exposes the limits of representation itself. Neither literature nor documentary film claims exhaustive access to reality. Their convergence lies in their shared refusal to resolve social contradictions into coherence. By preserving fragments, silences, and unresolved trajectories, both media resist the transformation of reality into consumable narrative. Comparison does not eliminate these limits; it clarifies them. Reality is verified not by completeness, but by resistance to simplification.

This chapter demonstrates that the criteria of reality articulated throughout this study are not abstract principles imposed on disparate materials. They emerge from sustained engagement with concrete cases across media and historical contexts.

Literature and documentary film converge not because they mirror one another, but

because they respond to the same structural conditions with different observational tools. Their comparative analysis reinforces the claim that reality is preserved where representation remains faithful to endurance, constraint, and unresolved experience. A further comparative field of particular analytical weight concerns war not as an event, but as a condition whose consequences extend far beyond formal cessation of hostilities. Literary and documentary records of war converge most clearly not in depictions of combat, but in their attention to aftermath, civilian endurance, and the long erosion of social structures. Erich Maria Remarque's postwar novels and the documentary photography of Don McCullin provide a precise basis for examining how reality is preserved where institutional narratives emphasize resolution, victory, or reconstruction.

Remarque's literary treatment of war is characterized by its refusal to delimit war temporally. In works such as *The Road Back* and *Shadows in Paradise*, war persists as an administrative and existential condition. Veterans and refugees encounter a society that has formally moved on but remains structurally unprepared to reintegrate them. Employment, housing, and legal recognition become contingent and unstable. War, in this literary register, is no longer a historical episode; it is a reconfiguration of social relations that continues to operate through bureaucratic procedures and moral indifference.

McCullin's photographic work documents a comparable persistence through visual means. His images rarely depict active combat. Instead, they record wounded bodies, displaced civilians, and devastated environments long after decisive moments have passed. The absence of action is central. Ruined neighborhoods, exhausted faces, and silent landscapes testify to a reality that institutional military narratives do not absorb. These images function as documentary evidence precisely because they resist heroic framing. They preserve the consequences of war rather than its spectacle.

The comparison between Remarque and McCullin reveals a shared criterion of reality grounded in aftermath. Reality is verified not at the point of maximal intensity, but in what remains when attention has shifted elsewhere. Literature reconstructs this

remainder through narrative continuity; photography preserves it through visual stasis. In both cases, the persistence of damage undermines institutional claims of closure. War is shown to exceed the temporal boundaries assigned to it by states and treaties. A crucial aspect of this comparison lies in the treatment of civilians. Both literary and documentary records foreground civilian endurance as a structurally neglected dimension of war. Civilians are neither protagonists nor casualties in the conventional sense; they are subjects of prolonged exposure. Remarque's characters navigate social environments in which civilian suffering lacks institutional language. McCullin's civilians occupy spaces of abandonment rather than battle. Their presence challenges the categorization of war as a matter of military engagement alone. Reality, in this comparative frame, is verified through the visibility of those for whom war never truly ends.

A second major comparative axis concerns silence, invisibility, and domestic interiors. While large-scale social disruptions often attract attention, much of social reality unfolds within private or semi-private spaces that resist documentation. Literature has long served as a primary archive of these spaces, while documentary film has approached them with caution due to ethical and practical constraints. The comparison between literary representations of domestic life and observational documentary practices reveals how reality is preserved where public visibility diminishes.

Thomas Hardy's novels offer a sustained examination of domestic interiors as sites of social regulation. Homes in Hardy's work are not spaces of refuge; they are environments in which moral expectations, economic pressures, and legal constraints converge. Domestic life becomes a terrain of silent negotiation. Decisions are delayed, aspirations curtailed, and suffering internalized. The absence of overt conflict does not indicate stability; it signals constraint. Hardy documents these dynamics through attention to routine, gesture, and unspoken tension. Reality is verified through what remains unsaid.

Theodore Dreiser's urban interiors extend this analysis into a different social context. Apartments, boarding houses, and temporary lodgings appear as spaces of transience

rather than belonging. Economic insecurity shapes domestic arrangements, producing forms of isolation that are neither accidental nor exceptional. Dreiser's observational realism records how domestic spaces absorb the pressures of market society. Silence in these interiors reflects not intimacy but exhaustion. Literature preserves these conditions by refusing to transform domestic life into sentimental refuge.

Observational documentary film approaches domestic interiors with a different representational logic. When documentary filmmakers enter private spaces, they do so under heightened ethical constraint. The camera's presence risks intrusion, yet its absence perpetuates invisibility. Films that succeed in documenting domestic reality do so by minimizing intervention and emphasizing duration. Long takes, ambient sound, and minimal dialogue preserve the texture of everyday life without imposing narrative significance. The camera observes not events, but routines.

The comparison between literary and documentary treatments of domestic interiors reveals a shared criterion of reality: invisibility as structural condition. Domestic suffering often lacks public articulation not because it is insignificant, but because it is normalized. Literature accesses this normalization through narrative interiority; documentary film registers it through visual patience. In both cases, reality is verified through repetition rather than revelation. The ordinary emerges as the primary site of social constraint.

This comparative analysis also clarifies the limits of representation. Certain aspects of domestic life resist both textual and visual documentation. Silence, hesitation, and internalized norms cannot be fully externalized without distortion. Literature approximates these dimensions through narrative technique; documentary film preserves their traces through absence of action. The convergence lies not in representational completeness, but in the acknowledgment of what cannot be shown. Reality is verified through restraint.

Across these comparative fields—war aftermath, civilian endurance, and domestic invisibility—a consistent pattern emerges. Reality asserts itself where institutional narratives withdraw, where visibility diminishes, and where resolution is absent.

Literature and documentary film converge in their capacity to preserve these conditions without transforming them into spectacle or lesson. Their differences in form do not weaken their documentary function; they sharpen it by revealing complementary dimensions of the same structural realities.

The comparative method employed in this chapter demonstrates that criteria of reality are not medium-specific. They are relational and structural. Persistence, exposure, and unresolved experience recur across literary and documentary contexts because they are features of social reality itself. Representation verifies reality not by explaining it, but by remaining faithful to its endurance.

A further domain in which the criteria of reality can be tested concerns gendered invisibility. Certain forms of social experience remain persistently under-registered not because they are rare, but because they are structurally feminized and therefore naturalized. Literature and documentary film converge in their capacity to preserve these experiences precisely where institutional representation treats them as background conditions rather than as social facts. Gendered invisibility does not manifest as absence of activity; it manifests as excess of expectation without corresponding recognition.

In literary realism, women's lives frequently unfold within constrained horizons shaped by economic dependency, moral regulation, and limited mobility. These constraints are not episodic; they constitute the ordinary texture of social existence. Thomas Hardy's female characters, for instance, do not encounter oppression through explicit prohibition alone. They encounter it through cumulative social expectations that render certain choices unthinkable before they are formally denied. The absence of viable alternatives functions as a form of social regulation that does not require overt enforcement. Literature documents this regulation through attention to hesitation, self-censorship, and delayed decision-making. Reality is verified through the narrowing of possibility rather than through dramatic confrontation.

Documentary film approaches gendered invisibility through observation of daily practices that remain outside institutional metrics. Women's labor within households,

informal economies, and caregiving networks is visually present yet administratively invisible. Documentary practices that attend to such labor do so by emphasizing duration and repetition. Cooking, cleaning, waiting, and tending are recorded without narrative emphasis. Their significance emerges not from singular moments but from accumulation. The camera's patience renders visible what institutions overlook because it does not culminate in discrete outcomes.

The comparison reveals a shared criterion of reality grounded in unacknowledged necessity. Gendered labor sustains social life without generating recognition proportional to its indispensability. Literature captures this asymmetry through narrative interiority; documentary film preserves it through visual routine. In both cases, reality is verified by the persistence of obligation without reward. The absence of institutional language for such labor does not negate its reality; it confirms its structural marginalization.

Care work constitutes a related but distinct comparative field. Care is often framed as moral disposition rather than as social practice. This framing obscures its material and temporal demands. Literary representations of care frequently emphasize emotional responsibility intertwined with economic vulnerability. Caregivers appear bound by obligations that limit autonomy while remaining socially undervalued. Literature documents how care becomes a site of silent sacrifice, where exhaustion is normalized and dependency moralized. The absence of resolution is central: care rarely ends; it diminishes gradually or transfers invisibly.

Documentary film registers care work through bodily proximity and temporal immersion. The camera observes feeding, bathing, accompanying, and waiting—activities that resist narrative condensation. These practices unfold in domestic or semi-institutional spaces that lack public visibility. Documentary observation preserves the physical and temporal cost of care without translating it into sentiment. The refusal to aestheticize care is critical. Reality is verified through endurance rather than affective appeal.

The comparative analysis underscores that care work operates within a temporal

regime distinct from both market time and bureaucratic time. It is cyclical rather than linear, repetitive rather than progressive. Literature and documentary film converge in preserving this temporality. They document how care structures daily life without producing milestones that institutions recognize. This preservation challenges representations that reduce care to moral virtue or familial obligation. It establishes care as a social condition with structural implications.

Children and non-voice introduce a further dimension of invisibility that tests the limits of representation. Children's experiences are often mediated through adult interpretation, rendering their perspectives indirect. Institutional records capture children as dependents, cases, or future subjects. Literature and documentary film offer alternative access by preserving non-voice rather than substituting it with explanation. Non-voice here does not signify silence alone; it signifies constrained articulation shaped by dependency and power asymmetry.

Literary texts that attend to childhood often emphasize partial understanding, misrecognition, and emotional exposure. Children perceive social reality without possessing the language to interpret it fully. Literature preserves this partiality rather than correcting it. Scenes of misunderstanding, fear, and unarticulated distress reveal social conditions as they are encountered rather than as they are explained. Reality is verified through the mismatch between experience and comprehension.

Documentary film confronts similar challenges. Ethical constraints limit direct interrogation of children, yet observation preserves their presence within social environments. The camera records proximity to adult worlds—homes, institutions, streets—without imposing narrative authority. Gestures, play, and withdrawal become indicators of social position. The absence of explicit testimony does not diminish evidentiary value; it constitutes it. Non-voice functions as evidence of power relations that structure articulation itself.

The comparison between literary and documentary treatments of children reveals a criterion of reality grounded in asymmetry. Children inhabit social realities they cannot shape or fully articulate. Literature accesses this asymmetry through narrative

perspective; documentary film preserves it through visual context. In both cases, reality is verified by constraint rather than expression. The child's position exposes the limits of representational regimes that equate voice with agency.

Across gendered invisibility, care work, and childhood non-voice, a consistent pattern emerges. Social realities that sustain collective life are frequently those least institutionally legible. Literature and documentary film converge in their capacity to preserve these realities without converting them into problems to be solved or virtues to be celebrated. Their comparative strength lies in maintaining fidelity to ordinary endurance where institutional narratives prefer resolution or abstraction.

These comparative fields reinforce the broader argument of this chapter: criteria of reality are most clearly discerned where representation resists amplification, acceleration, and closure. Gendered labor, care, and childhood experience do not demand attention through spectacle. They demand recognition through sustained observation. Literature and documentary film verify reality by remaining with these conditions, preserving their duration and asymmetry without instrumentalization.

Another comparative field in which the criteria of reality become particularly explicit concerns aging and social disappearance. Old age occupies an ambivalent position within modern societies. It is institutionally acknowledged yet experientially marginalized. Administrative systems recognize aging through pensions, healthcare categories, and demographic statistics, while simultaneously displacing older individuals from the spheres of productivity, visibility, and narrative relevance.

Literature and documentary film converge in their capacity to preserve aging as a lived condition rather than as a demographic variable.

Literary representations of aging often emphasize contraction rather than decline. Social space narrows, relationships diminish, and temporal horizons shorten.

Characters do not simply lose physical capacity; they lose social centrality. This loss is rarely dramatized. It unfolds through subtle shifts in attention, expectation, and relevance. Literature documents these shifts by attending to routine, memory lapses, and the recalibration of daily life. Aging appears not as biological destiny but as social

reclassification. Reality is verified through the experience of becoming peripheral. Documentary film registers aging through visual endurance. The camera observes slower movement, prolonged pauses, and the repetition of solitary routines. These observations resist sentimental framing. The absence of narrative progression is central. Aging does not culminate in revelation; it persists. Documentary time aligns with this persistence, preserving visibility where institutions offer only categorical recognition. The elderly subject appears neither heroic nor tragic, but present. This presence constitutes documentary evidence of a social condition that remains structurally underrepresented.

The comparison reveals a criterion of reality grounded in gradual erasure. Social disappearance is not abrupt; it is procedural. Institutions adjust expectations, reassign priorities, and redirect attention. Literature captures this erasure through narrative marginalization; documentary film preserves it through visual persistence. In both cases, reality is verified by the tension between institutional acknowledgment and experiential neglect. Aging becomes a site where administrative recognition coexists with social invisibility.

A further comparative axis concerns the disjunction between institutional compassion and lived neglect. Modern institutions often articulate compassion through formal mechanisms: welfare programs, humanitarian interventions, and care policies. These mechanisms produce narratives of concern and responsibility. Literature and documentary film test these narratives by examining how compassion is experienced by those subjected to it. The comparison exposes a recurrent discrepancy between institutional intention and lived consequence.

In literary accounts, institutional compassion frequently appears as conditional and procedural. Assistance is granted under criteria that require demonstration of need, compliance, or gratitude. Characters encounter compassion as a regulated transaction rather than as relational engagement. This regulation produces humiliation and dependency, transforming aid into a site of moral exposure. Literature documents this transformation by attending to affective responses—shame, resignation, and muted

resentment—that institutional records omit. Reality is verified through emotional residue rather than formal provision.

Documentary film observes similar dynamics through visual interaction. Scenes of aid distribution, medical consultation, or social services reveal asymmetries of power embedded within compassionate frameworks. The camera registers posture, tone, and spatial arrangement. Beneficiaries wait, explain, and justify; providers assess, record, and decide. The asymmetry is not incidental; it is structural. Documentary observation preserves these encounters without translating them into evaluative commentary. The absence of commentary allows the discrepancy between intention and effect to remain visible.

The comparison highlights a criterion of reality grounded in relational imbalance. Compassion, when institutionalized, often reproduces hierarchies it seeks to mitigate. Literature accesses this imbalance through narrative interiority; documentary film preserves it through visual proximity. In both cases, reality is verified not by outcomes but by interactional structure. The persistence of asymmetry undermines narratives of benevolence without resorting to accusation.

These additional comparative fields—aging, social disappearance, and institutional compassion—reinforce the argument that reality asserts itself most clearly where institutional representation is weakest. Administrative categories acknowledge existence without preserving experience. Literature and documentary film fill this gap by maintaining access to conditions that unfold slowly, quietly, and without resolution. Their comparative convergence across diverse social domains demonstrates the robustness of the criteria of reality articulated in this study.

Conclusion. Criteria of Reality and the Limits of Institutional Knowledge

This study has proceeded from a premise that remains unsettling for modern systems of knowledge: reality is not guaranteed by institutional recognition. What is recorded, classified, or officially acknowledged does not exhaust what is socially real. On the

contrary, some of the most stable and consequential dimensions of social reality persist precisely where institutional knowledge reaches its limits. Literature and documentary film have been examined here not as cultural supplements to sociological inquiry, but as autonomous modes through which reality is observed, preserved, and rendered thinkable under conditions of structural constraint.

Across different historical periods, social domains, and representational media, a consistent pattern has emerged. Reality asserts itself not through clarity, resolution, or coherence, but through endurance, exposure, and the persistence of unresolved conditions. This persistence is not accidental. It reflects the structural character of social arrangements that normalize inequality, defer responsibility, and redistribute visibility according to institutional priorities. Literature and documentary film do not reveal reality by uncovering hidden truths; they do so by remaining with what is already visible yet systematically disregarded.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this work demonstrates that reality is not medium-specific. The convergence between literary and documentary modes of observation does not result from aesthetic similarity, but from their shared orientation toward lived conditions that resist abstraction. Where institutional systems compress experience into categories, procedures, and outcomes, these media preserve duration, ambiguity, and contradiction. They operate not against institutions, but alongside them, marking the boundaries beyond which institutional knowledge becomes reductive.

One of the central findings of this study concerns the temporal structure of reality. Bureaucratic and administrative systems organize time for the purposes of regulation and closure. Deadlines, decisions, and procedural milestones fragment experience into manageable units. Literature and documentary film register a different temporality: time as it is endured. Waiting, repetition, stagnation, and gradual erosion emerge as defining features of social existence for those positioned at the margins of institutional power. Reality, in this temporal register, is verified not by events but by what fails to change. The absence of resolution becomes evidentiary.

This temporal dimension intersects with the politics of memory. Institutional remembrance seeks stabilization. It transforms the past into coherent narratives that support present identities and legitimize existing arrangements. Literature and documentary film intervene in this process by preserving counter-memory: fragments of experience that resist integration into sanctioned accounts. These counter-memories do not contest institutional narratives through opposition; they undermine them through persistence. By retaining unresolved residues, they expose the selective logic through which societies remember and forget.

Comparison has functioned throughout this work as a methodological instrument for revealing structural continuity beneath historical variation. The recurrence of similar experiential patterns across different contexts—poverty, displacement, bureaucratic domination, care work, aging, and childhood non-voice—demonstrates that these conditions are not contingent anomalies. They are structural outcomes reproduced under diverse institutional regimes. Comparison does not flatten difference; it reveals resonance. Through relational positioning, reality emerges not as a singular narrative but as a patterned field of endurance.

The social archive, as conceptualized in this study, is not an alternative institution but a dispersed field of preservation. It is constituted through texts, images, and narratives that retain what administrative systems discard. This archive is inherently unstable, heterogeneous, and incomplete. Its value lies precisely in this instability. A coherent archive would replicate institutional logic; an open archive preserves reality.

Literature and documentary film contribute to this openness by resisting closure and refusing to translate experience into definitive meaning.

Ethics occupies a central position within this framework, though not in the conventional sense of moral evaluation. The ethics articulated here concerns restraint rather than judgment. To preserve reality without aestheticizing it, to observe without appropriating, and to maintain visibility without promising redemption—these are ethical commitments embedded in representational practice. Literature and documentary film enact such commitments by acknowledging the limits of

representation. They do not claim to speak for their subjects; they preserve conditions under which those subjects remain socially legible without being subsumed.

The analysis of gendered invisibility, care work, and childhood non-voice underscores the structural nature of under-recognition. These domains sustain collective life while remaining institutionally marginal. Their persistence across literary and documentary records confirms that invisibility is not a failure of observation but a feature of social organization. Reality is verified here not through articulation, but through constraint. The absence of voice becomes evidence of power relations that structure who can speak, who must endure, and who remains peripheral.

Aging and social disappearance further reinforce this conclusion. The gradual withdrawal of social relevance experienced by older individuals is rarely dramatized or institutionally addressed. Literature and documentary film preserve this withdrawal by remaining attentive to routine, solitude, and temporal contraction. Reality, in this context, is verified through the experience of becoming peripheral without ceasing to exist. Institutional recognition without experiential acknowledgment emerges as a defining contradiction of modern societies.

The discrepancy between institutional compassion and lived neglect exposes another dimension of reality. Formal mechanisms of care and assistance articulate concern while reproducing asymmetry. Literature and documentary film document how compassion becomes procedural, conditional, and morally regulated. Reality is verified not by declared intention, but by interactional structure. The persistence of dependency and humiliation undermines narratives of benevolence without requiring explicit critique.

Taken together, these findings allow for the articulation of criteria of reality that are neither philosophical abstractions nor methodological prescriptions. Reality, as evidenced through literature and documentary film, is characterized by persistence without resolution, visibility without recognition, and endurance without redemption. These criteria do not compete with empirical sociology or historical documentation; they delimit their reach. They identify the zones in which institutional knowledge

becomes insufficient and where alternative modes of observation become indispensable.

In an era saturated with images, narratives, and data, the distinction between representation and simulation acquires renewed urgency. The proliferation of visual and textual material does not guarantee access to reality. On the contrary, it often facilitates its erasure through acceleration, aestheticization, and moral simplification. Literature and documentary film retain their critical relevance precisely because they resist these tendencies. They slow down observation, preserve ambiguity, and refuse closure.

This study does not propose literature and documentary film as privileged or superior forms of knowledge. It proposes them as necessary ones. They function as criteria of reality insofar as they preserve what institutions cannot fully absorb without contradiction. By maintaining access to unresolved experience, they ensure that social reality remains thinkable beyond administrative categories and commemorative narratives.

Reality, in this sense, is not what has been successfully managed, remembered, or explained. It is what continues to exert pressure despite attempts at resolution.

Literature and documentary film preserve this pressure. They do not offer consolation or solutions. They offer continuity of attention. In doing so, they fulfill a sociological function that cannot be replaced by institutional knowledge alone.

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